

John H. Houghton House  
307 West 12th Street  
Austin  
Travis County  
Texas

HABS No. TX-3264

HABS,  
TEX,  
227-AUST,  
Re-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
JOHN H. HOUGHTON HOUSE HABS NO. TX-3264

Location: 307 West 12th Street, northwest corner of 12th and Guadalupe Streets, Austin, Travis County, Texas

USGS Austin East Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.620840.3349670

Present Owner: John J. Stokes  
Stokes Construction Company  
P.O. Box 629  
San Marcos, Texas 78666

Present Occupant: Demolished, summer, 1973

Significance: The John H. Houghton House was one of the larger, more elegant residences built in the late nineteenth century in the Capitol area. Its original owner, John H. Houghton, a prominent Austin businessman, employed James Wahrenberger, who was an architect of note in central Texas, to design the house. As the surrounding city has changed during the twentieth century, the Houghton House has remained one of the major historical and architectural symbols reflecting life in Austin in the late nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1886-1887. The house appears on the 1887 Bird's Eye View of Austin; John H. Houghton was first listed as occupying the house in the 1889-1890 Austin city directory.
2. Architect: James Wahrenberger (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 4, 1890, xerox copy in Austin-Travis County Collection, Austin Public Library). Wahrenberger was born of Swiss parentage in Austin in 1855. When fourteen years old he went to Philadelphia to attend the West Penn Square Academy for two years. In 1872, he went to Europe and pursued mathematical studies while attending lectures at the Polytechnic College at Zurich where he remained about a year and a half. He then went to Karlsruhe, Baden, where he spent three years studying architecture. After graduating in 1876, he went to Stuttgart, and eventually returned to Austin after staying in Europe about six years.

Wahrenberger was listed in only two Austin city directories. In 1879-1880, he was listed as a partner in the firm of Glenn and Wahrenberger, architects and engineers. By the 1881-1882 directory, he was practicing alone and advertised "Plans and estimates furnished for every description of private and public buildings." He was one of two Texans to submit designs for a new State Capitol in 1880. His plan took second place in the competition.

Sometime in 1882 or 1883, Wahrenberger moved to San Antonio where he practiced until his death in 1924. He served as president of the Texas State Association of Architects for several terms and in 1918 was designated in the Association year book the "Grand Old Man" of the architectural profession of Texas. He wrote the first building ordinances for the City of San Antonio and was the first city building inspector.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the structure stands. Reference is to the Clerk's Office of the County of Travis, Texas.

1884 Deed July 19, 1884, recorded July 30, 1884, in Volume 61, Pages 322-323.

Wilson Green and wife Melissa, and daughter Ellis and her husband, William L. Thomson, all of Washington County, Kentucky

To

J.H. Houghton.

1911 Will written May 22, 1908, probated January 20, 1911, Will 3476.

John H. Houghton

To

Wife Florence.

1912 Will written November 14, 1910, probated January 1, 1912, Will 3594.

Florence Houghton

To

Josephine Houghton Allen (daughter)

1919 Proof of will February 20, 1919, recorded December 27, 1921, in Volume 332, page 246.

J.H. Allen died on December 3, 1918, in Travis County but "domicile being in Jim Hogg County."

1970 Deed October 5, 1970, recorded October 6, 1970, in Volume 3936, pages 470-472.

Ruth Robinson and husband, J.D. Robinson

To  
Victoria Audish Zegub  
North 123.70 feet of lots 11 and 12.

1971 Deed June 28, 1971, recorded June 28, 1971, in Volume  
4087, pages 1896-1897.

V.A. Zegub and husband Charles A. Zegub  
To  
Lloyd P. Lochridge Jr. and Robert C. McGinnis.

1972 Deed June 27, 1972, recorded June 30, 1972, in Volume  
4373, pages 410-411

Lloyd P. Lochridge, Jr. and Robert C. McGinnis  
To  
Judy Johnson

1973 Deed March 15, 1973, recorded March 16, 1973, in Volume  
4585, pages 1333-1335

Judy Johnson  
To  
John J. Stokes, Sr. of Hays County.

4. Builders, suppliers:

a. Builder: Charles A. Shurr (Information given Austin-Travis County Collection, Austin Public Library on October 5, 1968, by Charles Andrew Shurr, grandson of builder). Shurr (1857-1913) was first listed in the Austin city directory in 1877-78, as a "carpenter," the occupational description he used until 1889-90, when he was listed as a "Carpenter, Contractor, Builder." The same year, he placed a large advertisement in the directory stating that he would "contract for all kinds of builders." In the 1909-10 directory he is shown as a member of the Austin Builders Exchange Company, which consisted of the fourteen leading tax-paying contractors and residence owners of Austin.

b. Suppliers: Michael Butler, Butler Brick Company, supplier of brick (Information from Mrs. W.D. Cooper, grand-daughter of Michael Butler.)

5. Original plans and construction: No original drawings or plans have been located. Early photographs do document that the house was L-shaped with an open two-story porch on the inward portion of the L. The iron fence which surrounded the property appears in photographs dating from the late nineteenth century to 1958. The Carriage House was built circa 1890 and was separated from the adjoining yard by a high board fence.

The first-floor plan appears to have originally included the entrance and central hall, flanked on the east side by the stairwell and one room (perhaps a library) and on the west side by the drawing and dining rooms, to the back of which were the pantry, service hall, and kitchen. The same room arrangement was used on the second floor, while the smaller third floor contained storage rooms and a playroom.

6. Alterations and Additions: At undetermined dates, various frame enclosures and additions were made to the rear L portion of the house. This included a large room, referred to as a "ballroom," on the first floor.

B Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The Houghton House was built in the last half of the 1880s by one of the leading families in Austin. John Henry Houghton, who was born in 1847, spent his early years attempting to reclaim the position and wealth his family had lost during the Civil War. He began as a teamster hauling goods from Hempstead, which was the nearest railhead to Austin and Georgetown. After a successful business venture in Georgetown, Houghton moved to Austin where, by the 1879-1880 city directory, he had formed a partnership with J.H. Robinson as "wholesale dealers in wines, liquors, cigars and tobacco." In addition to the lucrative wholesale business, Houghton invested heavily in ranch lands. In the last five years of his life the partnership was dissolved so Houghton could devote his full time to cattle interests and his duties as first vice-president of the American National Bank in Austin. Houghton died in 1910, and upon the death of his wife the following year, the property was inherited by their daughter, Josephine Houghton Allen and her husband, Wilbur Price Allen. Allen was a successful lawyer, banker, rancher, and capitalist. Since the late 1920s, the house has been used for a variety of purposes such as apartments, offices, and shops.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views:

Bird's Eye View of the City of Austin, Travis County, Texas,  
1872. Drawn by Augustus Koch.

Austin, State Capital of Texas. Drawn by Augustus Koch, 1887.

2. Primary and unpublished sources:

Austin City Directories, 1872-73 to present, Austin-Travis  
County Collection, Austin Public Library.

Patent Records, City Lots of Austin (Volume 1, Book 1), General Land Office.

Travis County Deed Books and Probate Records, Travis County Courthouse, Austin, Texas.

3. Secondary and published sources:

Austin Board of Trade. The Industrial Advantages of Austin, Texas. Austin, Texas: The Akehurst Publishing Co., 1894.

Biography File - Wahrenberger Family, House File - 307 West 12th Street, and Austin File - Description to 1900, Austin-Travis County Collection, Austin Public Library.

Elgin Butler Brick Company, 1873-1963. Austin: Elgin Butler Brick Company, 1963.

Johnson, Frank W. A History of Texas and Texans. The American Historical Society: Chicago and New York, 1914.

Memorial and Genealogical Record of Southwest Texas. Chicago: Goodspeed Brothers, Publishers, 1894.

Texas Historical Survey Committee, Marker Files and National Register Files.

Williamson, Roxanne Kuter. "Victorian Architecture in Austin." M.A. Thesis, the University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 1967.

Prepared by:  
Ellen Beasley  
Project Historian  
National Park Service  
August 1973

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

General Statement:

Architectural character: Built in the area immediately west of the Capitol grounds, this was one of the outstanding nineteenth century mansions of the city. This late Victorian structure with its round turret and stately central tower has long been a significant landmark of Austin.

2. Condition of the fabric: The exterior brick masonry is sound; the roof is in bad condition. Interiors have been neglected; fireplace mantels and other interior decorative elements have been removed. While measurements were underway, the house was being demolished; it is to be replaced by a parking structure.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-and-one-half-story house has a small unfinished cellar under the rear portion. The building, which is irregularly asymmetrical in form, 58' across and 71' - 4" deep, features a central square tower on the front facade, a round tower on the northwest corner, and a projecting bay on the west facade.
2. Foundations: Rubble limestone walls of the cellar are 2' thick. Above grade the walls are massive, rock-faced ashlar limestone; the top course is smooth hammer-dressed finish with a cove molding above.
3. Wall construction: Exterior walls, 14" thick, are of hard-pressed, light yellow-buff brick. Joints are 3/16" in thickness.
4. Structural system, framing: Exterior walls and major partition walls of the original portion were brick, load-bearing. Floor joists are full 2 X 12s, 16" on center. Roof rafters are full 2 X 6s, 16" on center. The added ballroom portion is of frame construction.
5. Porches: The entrance porch is 7' X 11'-6" with a flooring of decorative tile. The approach steps, piers, upper lintels, and the upper balustrade are of cut limestone. The ceiling is formed with 8" wrought-iron I-beams spanned between with arched corrugated sheetiron above which there is concrete fill; the upper flooring is of decorative tile. The first floor side railings are of cast iron.

The west porch has stone approach steps, wood flooring and wood roof construction. The four turned wood posts are 7" X 7". The original open porches on the east side have been enclosed with frame walls. The rear service porch and steps are of wood construction, in bad state of repair.

6. Chimneys: The three main chimneys, each serving two fireplaces, are decorative brickwork, usually rising 2 1/2' to 3' above the roof ridges. A fourth chimney of the rear wing served the kitchen stove on the first floor, and a metal heating stove on the second.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The front doorway, recessed and topped with a stone segmental arch, has a transom above. The opening is 5' X 12': the paired 2" wood doors are 2'-6" X 9'-0" with plate glass and formal brass hardware. The door on the west side is 3'-0" X 8'-0" with arched transom above. It is glazed with plate glass.
- b. Windows: Typical windows are double-hung wood sash, each with a single pane. Window openings on the first floor are usually 3'-0" X 10'-0" on the north side. Second-floor window openings are 3'-0" X 8'-0" with square heads trimmed with a hood molding.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof has a complex form with ridged and hipped projections and numerous dormers. Slopes vary from 12 in 12 down to 7 in 12. Sloping roofs are covered with patterned gray slate shingles. Over the central portion there is a flat metal-covered deck, 17'-6" X 28' in size. Over the ballroom addition there is also a flat metal-covered deck with a 12" to 14" high parapet on the east and south sides.
- b. Cornice: The bracketed main cornice is galvanized sheetmetal, painted to match the stone trim.
- c. Dormers, towers: Wood-framed dormers, covered with sheet metal, are of various forms, some gabled, some round-headed. The central square tower over the entrance has a flared pyramidal steep roof with dormers on each of the four sides. The corner circular tower is topped with a steep-roofed conical tower with a single dormer. There are decorative metal finials on these towers.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Cellar: Under the south wing there is a cellar, 15' X 26' in size, with a concrete floor, unfinished walls and ceiling.
- b. First floor: Under the main tower there is an entrance foyer which leads to the main hall. On the left is the stairhall, then the library, and the added large ballroom. To the right of the hall is the parlor with wide folding



doors that opened to the octagonal dining room. Next is the serving pantry (now a bathroom), the rear stairhall and finally the kitchen.

- c. Second floor: To the east of the central hallway there are two bedrooms, and to the west there are two bedrooms and a large bathroom. Beyond the rear stairhall there is a maid's bedroom.
  - d. Third floor: There is a tower room and a children's playroom. Other attic rooms are floored but walls and ceilings are unfinished; the spaces were used for storage.
2. Stairways: The elegant main stair is an open-well with one landing and winders, 7 1/8" X 10" steps. The service stair is U-type with winders, 8" X 7" steps; this stair leads from first floor to attic.
- In the second-floor hall there is a straight-run stair, 8" X 8" steps, that leads to the third floor rooms. All stairs were carpeted.
- 3. Flooring: The original flooring was 5" in width. This was overlaid 3/4" X 3" edgegrain pine. The flooring in the ballroom is of patterned oak. The kitchen is now carpeted wall-to-wall; the maid's room is covered with linoleum. Bathrooms are tiled.
  - 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls and ceilings are plastered, usually painted white. Some rooms are papered.
  - 5. Doorways and doors: Typical doors are 3' - 0" X 7' - 6", four panel, with transoms above. Trim on first floor is 9" in width, on second floor the trim is 6" in width.
  - 6. Decorative features: The mantels on the six fireplaces have all been removed. There are two decorative arches of wood at the base of the main stairway. The pilasters on the "Palladian type" archway leading to the central hallway have been removed. In the corner of the dining room there is a built-in china closet of fine cabinetwork; the decorative glass doors have been removed. The walls of the dining room have a 42" wainscot, heavily panelled.
  - 7. Lighting fixtures: There are ceiling rosettes in the foyer, the central hall and the library. The chandeliers have been removed.

8. Heating: There are three fireplaces on each of the two main floors. In the cellar there is a gas-fired, gravity type, hot-air furnace. Open gas heaters were used to heat some of the upper rooms.

D. Site:

1. General setting: The house faces north onto 12th Street. The lot has a 91' frontage on 12th Street and a 163' side frontage on Guadalupe Street. A small portion, (about 32' frontage on Guadalupe Street) was sold in 1946 to ALton C. White. This included the Carriage House.
2. Outbuildings: On the southwest corner of the original lot, adjacent to the alley, there is a carriage house with living quarters above. See HABS No. TX-3264A.
3. Landscaping, enclosures: There was a 3 1/2' wrought-iron fence along each of the streets; portions of the stone base are still in place along 12th Street. A photo dated 1894 shows a large oak near 12th Street, and a row of sycamore trees along Guadalupe Street. The lot is now badly neglected; a portion of the area is now used for parking.

Prepared by:  
Melvin M. Rotsch, Architect  
Texas A. & M. University  
Project Supervisor  
National Park Service  
July 1973

PART III: PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by the National Park Service and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Recorded under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1973 at the HABS field office at the University of Texas, Austin. Project supervisor was Melvin M. Rotsch (architect, Texas A & M University); project historian was Ellen Beasley; student architects were J. Tucker Bishop (University of Texas), Stephen J. Farneth (Carnegie-Mellon University), Robert D. Ferland (Cornell University), Carl J. Frenning (University of Pennsylvania), Richard W. Schreiber (Boston Architectural Center), and David J. Yturralde (University of Texas).